

1-1-2011

Book Review: Planting Churches in the 21st Century: A Guide for Those Who Want Fresh Perspectives and New Ideas for Creating Congregations by Stuart Murray

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Recommended Citation

Allen, S. L. (2011). Book Review: Planting Churches in the 21st Century: A Guide for Those Who Want Fresh Perspectives and New Ideas for Creating Congregations by Stuart Murray. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 2(2), 331-333. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj/vol2/iss2/19>

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Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches in the 21st Century: A Guide for Those Who Want Fresh Perspectives and New Ideas for Creating Congregations*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010, 227 pp., \$19.99.

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Stuart Murray brings more than thirty years experience to bear in writing this, his sixth book on church planting. He has served as a pastor and church planter in South London, England, as well as an educator, missional entrepreneur, coach, mentor, trainer, and consultant to numerous individuals, churches, and denominations.

Murray's stated purpose for this text is "to provide a framework for practitioners and for those who deploy and support them, to . . . think through a range of issues and learn from the often hard-won experience of other church planters" (209). He undertakes this purpose with a view toward simulating "more planting and more effective planting, more creative planting and more responsible planting, initiatives that are better researched and contextualized, and new churches that are healthier and more sustainable. (209). He is motivated by the notion that, "far from having had its day" in the 1990's upsurge of activity in England and Western Europe, church planting is a potentially viable strategy for missions and evangelism for the twenty-first century, even if it requires careful re-conception (16).

331

A few things in particular make this work exceptional among similar church planting resources. Foundational to his premise, Murray begins in chapter one by examining the language, scope, and context of church planting. First, he acknowledges that there are various reasons why churches are planted in the West. Offering a fair-minded but critical scrutiny of many of the motives for planting churches, he sets forth to examine the missional considerations underpinning those motives and their appropriateness in "post-Christendom Western societies" (16). Second, while admittedly written from his "post-Christian" European perspective, Murray seems to anticipate a more global, upstream significance to the questions raised in his text. The author aspires to make the case for the recovery of church planting's lost image of "adventure, exploration, provisionality, creativity, gentleness, and humility rather than imperialism, imposition, colonization, insensitivity and marketing" (17). Third, the author surprisingly sees the need to locate church planting within a conceptual model that scrutinizes and yet reaffirms

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 19
its role in evangelism and mission but that defines “success,” more appropriately, within its given context. Fourth, while framing the book’s outline by asking the very basic questions of “why,” “how,” “where,” “when,” “what,” “who,” and “what next,” Murray consistently invites the perspectives, not only of the church planter, but also of those who deploy planters, such as sending churches, mission agencies, and denominations. Finally, the author overtly aims to inspire learning from the most recent generations of church planting, which he believes will lead to the discovery of “fresh expressions” and “emerging” forms of planting that are “contextually sensitive, missionally attuned, and ecclesially imaginative” (16).

The very aspects that commend this book to mission strategists and “those who deploy planters” also make this book no primer for the uninitiated planter or novice sending church. While the questions raised by Murray are of critical pertinence to the church and its task of mission in the twenty-first century, they appear to be too academic or esoteric, outside of a seminary classroom or mission agency headquarters. The author describes this work as “strategic and practical, rather than theological,” (17) and yet “not a step by step guide” (12). The planter or planting church seeking a “how to” manual for church planting—much less for planting “fresh expressions” or “emerging churches”—will be left wanting.

Murray challenges church planters, reproducing churches, and mission practitioners and agencies to engage their respective roles in the task of church planting by focusing upon quality rather than quantity and upon what kind of churches to plant rather than how many to plant (13). This is a book which asks very basic church planting questions and seeks to answer them from the perspectives of recent church history and sound missional principles.

As noted in the subtitle, Murray’s text overtly aims to serve as “A Guide for Those who Want Fresh Perspectives and New Ideas for Creating Congregations.” While the author repeatedly alludes to “fresh expressions” and “emerging churches,” the book rarely does more than highlight a prospective model or arena in which this kind of Christian community might be forged. The conspicuous absence of case studies, describing real-life “fresh expressions” or “emerging churches,” how these have emerged, and how they are faring, is a weakness for “a guide” to those seeking to explore such expressions. Save for the critique of recent church planting paradigms and the occasional citation of precedents wherein new ideas or directions were pursued, this study lacks demonstrable evidence that the proposed alternatives are more viable, more missionally—or evangelistically—intentional, or more prone to be contextually appropriate in a given setting.

In all fairness, however, unless one is well-acquainted with the post-Christian, British ecclesial scene, it may be that the aforementioned “case studies” are too rare

Allen: Book Review: Planting Churches in the 21st Century: A Guide for T
 or non-existent to be noteworthy. To the mission strategist, in any event, the veracity of the bulk of Murray's assertions is palpable, in principle. Whether or not the author illustrates these assertions, he is seeking, in part, to describe what all careful observers are witnessing, or likely will witness, with respect to the paradigm shifts accompanying the encroachment of a pervasive, post-Christian worldview.

What is more, Murray quite aptly critiques the inadequate response of recent generations of church planting to post-Christendom's onset, and he offers helpful insights into the implications of these shortcomings for church planting today. For example, in one instance, the author attributes the scarce occurrence of repeat, or "serial," church planters to the "legacy of the Christendom era, with its focus on pastor-teachers settled in parishes and its antipathy toward itinerant ministry" (77). Murray observes that recent attempts to recover the deployment of "pioneer ministers" and "apostolic" church planters may be an indication that the "missional realities of post-Christendom are at last challenging this maintenance-oriented approach to church leadership" (77).

333

This book is very readable, insightful, and thought-provoking. Murray helpfully acknowledges the increasing complexity of the church planting task, given the growing secularization, on one hand, and pluralization, on the other hand, of western society. The author asserts that, if "plug-and-play" methodologies for church planting were ever suitable for contextually indiscriminate implementation, that day is past in Britain and the post-Christianized West. Murray wisely notes, however, that "Acknowledging our convictions, recognizing constraints, and respecting the context are not alternatives to seeking God's direction but resources for a prayerful discernment process" (144). He also reaffirms that, whereas "the question 'What is church?' is legitimate . . . [,] 'What is the gospel?' is not" (153).

Though it may have limited value to the inexperienced in church planting or as a first-read on church planting, overall, this text represents a strong and needed contribution to the dialogue surrounding church planting in a post-modern age and amidst an increasingly post-Christianized context. Books addressing the audience of sending churches, mission agency personnel, strategists, or denominational missionaries are far too few in number. This represents a work that can be deeply appreciated by those engaging church planting from these capacities. From the perspective of the mission agency, a denomination, the church planting strategist, or even the seminary educator, the majority of this text entertains foundationally missional, and potentially formative, considerations for church planters and church planting churches. May its genre increase!